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## A German Diaspora? Russian Germans between homelands and hostlands

Ruth Wittlinger

There has been an explosion of diaspora studies since the 1980s. In 2005, Rogers Brubaker already pointed out that the term diaspora 'has proliferated, its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted' – with a 'dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space' resulting in what 'one might call a "diaspora" diaspora'.<sup>1</sup> More recently, academic interest in past and present ethnic German communities abroad has increased considerably. In spite of this, the term diaspora has permeated neither research publications nor the political discourse on ethnic Germans in Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the theoretical framework which has been developed in diaspora studies, this chapter will show that ethnic German communities which migrated to the Russian Empire and experienced further dispersals from there, also known as Russian Germans, can indeed be seen as a German diaspora. In fact, they provide a particularly interesting and complex case study of a diaspora. It will employ concepts, categories and criteria developed by key thinkers in the field of diaspora studies in order to shed light on the nature of the German diaspora in the Former Soviet Union, its main features and in particular, its relationship with the 'homeland' and how this has been affected by the mass migrations of ethnic Germans to Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It will also examine to what extent and in what ways Germany has managed to renegotiate the relationship with its diaspora in

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker: The 'Diaspora' Diaspora. In: Ethnic and Racial Studies 28, 1 (2005), pp. 1-19, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> Most publications use terms and expressions such as 'ethnic Germans', 'the Heimat abroad' or 'Auslandsdeutschtum' rather than 'diaspora', see for example, Krista O' Donnell, Renate Bridenthal and Nancy R. Reagin (eds): The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness. London (2005); David Rock and Stefan Wolff (eds): Coming Home to Germany? The Integration of Ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe in the Federal Republic since 1945. New York (2002); Frederik Schulze: 'Auslandsdeutschtum' in Brazil (1919–1941): Global Discourses and Local Histories. German History 33, 3 (2015), pp. 405-422. There are also some exceptions, however, e.g. Stefan Manz: Constructing a German Diaspora: The 'Greater German Empire', 1871-1914. London (2014); Alexander Maxwell and Sacha E. Davis: Germanness beyond Germany: Collective Identity in German Diaspora Communities. German Studies Review 39, 1 (2016): 1-15.

the post-Cold War context and establish the key features of this relationship. It will consider the question of whether and how the relationship has moved on from one mired in Germany's special responsibility arising from World War II, usually described as 'the long-term consequences of WW II' (*Spätfolgen des Zweiten Weltkriegs*) and emphasising German victimhood, to one compatible with the new post-Cold War realities. In addition to the sources mentioned in the references, the analysis draws on data derived from interviews conducted with members of ethnic German communities in Germany and Russia, representatives and officials of their organisations in the two countries, as well as policy makers.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point for the analysis is provided by the characteristics which William Safran has identified as key to the concept of diaspora. According to Safran, the concept of diaspora should be applied to members of expatriate minority communities who share several but not necessarily all of the following characteristics: (1) the members or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions; (2) they share a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland, its physical location, history and achievements; (3) members of these communities believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society, leaving them feeling alienated and isolated; (4) the ancestral homeland is regarded as their 'true, ideal home' and the place to which they and their descendants would or should eventually return when the conditions are appropriate; (5) members of the communities believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; (6) members of these communities either directly or indirectly relate to this homeland and their 'ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity' are defined by this relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Safran's six points, which were published in the inaugural volume of the journal *Diaspora* in 1991, have since been critiqued, refined, as well as further developed by

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews were carried out in 2011 and 2012 and nearly all of them were conducted in German. I needed the services of a Russian interpreter only on one occasion when I spoke to a group of approximately twenty self-ascribed young Russian Germans in Moscow, most of which did not speak any German at all. Unless indicated otherwise, quotes in the text are derived from these interviews.

<sup>4</sup> William Safran: *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*. In: *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, 1 (1991), pp. 83-99.

a number of scholars.<sup>5</sup> Apart from extending the concept of diaspora to include groups whose dispersal was voluntary rather than forced, Robin Cohen has developed a typology to classify diasporas into victim, labour, trade and imperial. In contrast to Safran, he also recommends a recognition of the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity. According to Cohen, the 'tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity is often a creative, enriching one.'<sup>6</sup> In addition to Safran's criteria, he also suggests including as a criterion a return movement to the homeland or at least a continuing connection. More than Safran, Cohen also emphasises the existence of a diasporic consciousness as a common feature of diasporas: 'a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate'. He also considers 'a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement' to be a characteristic of a diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

Arguing against the proliferation of the term diaspora because it leads to meaninglessness – '[i]f everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so' – Brubaker condenses the debate considerably by identifying three main elements which he considers to be widely understood as constitutive of diaspora: the dispersion in space, the orientation to a 'homeland' and what he calls 'boundary-maintenance', that is 'the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society'.<sup>8</sup>

Diaspora theorists have also been keen to point out that their use of the term diaspora is not essentialist but that they see it 'as a category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than a bounded group'<sup>9</sup> and that its key constituent parts 'ethnicity' and 'homeland' must be seen as 'multifaceted, historically contingent and socially constructed entities'.<sup>10</sup> The use of the term diaspora in this chapter is based on the same assumptions.

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief summary of social constructionist critiques of diaspora, see Robin Cohen: *Global Diasporas*. 2nd edition. London 2008, pp. 8-11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Brubaker: *The 'Diaspora' Diaspora*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen: *Global Diasporas*, p. 123.

## **Different types of dispersal of Russian Germans: multi-directional voluntary and forced migration**

The initial as well as subsequent dispersals of ethnic Germans who migrated to the Russian Empire have taken a number of different forms as well as directions during the course of their history. Unlike is the case in classical notions of diaspora, the origins of the German diaspora in Eastern and Central Europe and the successor states of the Soviet Union are to be found not in forced dispersal but in voluntary emigration. Attracted by privileges such as free land, freedom of religion and exemption from military service, settlers (*Kolonisten*) from German principalities migrated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in several waves and founded settlements on the shore of the Black Sea and along the Volga, in the area around Saratov. As privileges started to be revoked and repression started to set in from the 1870s onwards, considerable numbers of German settlers decided to move on and left Russia for Canada, the United States and also South America.<sup>11</sup>

The situation of ethnic German communities in Russia and the Soviet Union deteriorated dramatically in the context of the two world wars, with forced dispersal being increasingly utilised by the Soviet leadership. At the beginning of the First World War, tsarist authorities already forcibly resettled Germans living near the front or in strategically important areas.<sup>12</sup> As Irina Mukhina has pointed out, however, between the two world wars, ethnic Germans seemed to benefit from the Soviet Union's policy of ethnic self-determination when Volga Germans were granted some autonomy, culminating in the region receiving a new administrative status as the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Volga Germans in 1924.<sup>13</sup> Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 predictably caused a severe reaction by Stalin and resulted in extensive further deportations of ethnic Germans from the European part of the Soviet Union to Siberia and Kazakhstan. It also meant the end of the autonomous republic.

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<sup>11</sup> For an account of the history of the Russian Germans see, for example, Alfred Eisfeld: *Die Russlanddeutschen*. 2nd edition. Munich 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Irina Mukhina: *The Germans of the Soviet Union*. London 2007, p. 35. See also Eric Lohr: *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I*. Cambridge, Mass. 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Mukhina: *The Germans of the Soviet Union*, p. 39.

Some ethnic German groups, for example the Bessarabia Germans, collectively left in 1940 and – in the context of the provisions made in the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 (which envisaged that the Soviet Union would receive some of the territories where ethnic Germans had settled) and Hitler's '*Heim ins Reich*' policy – migrated first to Germany, to be then resettled in Nazi occupied Poland only having to flee from there again from the advancing Red Army in 1944-45. Germans living in the Black Sea region, too, were resettled in occupied Poland in 1943/44 and fled westward at the end of the war.

Since many diasporic communities have their origins in forced dispersal, victimhood is very often a crucial aspect of diasporic consciousness or 'boundary maintenance' as Brubaker has termed it. In the case of ethnic German communities in Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union, however, victimhood became an important part of diasporic identity mainly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it by and large seems to have eclipsed other collective memory strands. What could have been considered a labour or colonising diaspora due to its early history, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly from the early 1940s onwards and throughout the Cold War, increasingly came to be seen by its members but also by (West) German governments as a community bound together by the suffering experienced at the hands of its 'hostland', the Soviet Union.

Probably the most significant dispersal affecting the shape and size of the diaspora of ethnic Germans in the Former Soviet Union was caused by the dramatic changes in domestic and international politics, i.e. Gorbachev's policy of perestroika and the subsequent end of the Cold War. It constituted the most serious threat to the diaspora's existence, ironically more than repressions and deportations or the assimilation policy of the Soviet Union had managed to do, and with hindsight might turn out to have been the beginning of the 'unmaking'<sup>14</sup> of the German diaspora in the Former Soviet Union. Mass migrations of ethnic Germans to their 'homeland', the Federal Republic, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, caused by a change of emigration legislation in the Soviet Union in 1987, can be seen as the diaspora returning 'home' but also – since they have often been considered as Russians

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<sup>14</sup> As Nicholas Van Hear has pointed out 'diasporas can be made and unmade', quoted in Cohen: *Global Diasporas*, p. 147.

rather than Germans by their co-ethnics in Germany – as ethnic Germans moving from one diaspora to another.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from arguably creating this new diaspora of now Russian Germans in the Federal Republic, the mass migration seriously thinned out the ethnic German communities in the successor states of the Soviet Union. Largely unsuccessful attempts to counter the mass migration and make it more attractive for the communities to stay in the post-Soviet space included the recreation of semi-autonomous German national *rayons* in Halbstadt in the Altai region and in Asowo in the Omsk region, both in Western Siberia.

In contrast to other diasporas which have been ‘deterritorialized’<sup>16</sup>, both voluntary as well as forced dispersals of ethnic Germans who initially emigrated to Russia have very often been associated with territory either in the shape of colonies and compact settlements, for example in the case of the autonomous Volga Republic or the *rayons*, or forcibly following the deportations and life in special settlements (*Sondersiedlungen*). As Christin Hess has pointed out, even now, residential segregation of Russian Germans who migrated to the Federal Republic in the late 1980s and early 1990s has weakened but not disappeared.<sup>17</sup> Arguably, this reflects, enables, and perpetuates a continued diasporic consciousness even though the diaspora has returned ‘home’.

The multi-faceted and multi-directional dispersal of ethnic Germans who originally migrated to the Russian Empire is encapsulated in the notion of ‘*Volk auf dem Weg*’ (A People on the Move), the title of a journal published by the Association of Germans from Russia (*Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland*) which has also been used as a title for a travelling exhibition on the history of ethnic Germans who originally migrated to the Russian Empire.

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<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon has also affected other groups of ethnic Germans, for example, the Transylvanian Saxons in Romania, see James Koranyi and Ruth Wittlinger: From Diaspora to Diaspora: The Case of Transylvanian Saxons in Romania and Germany. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 17, 1 (2011), pp. 96-115.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen: *Global Diasporas*, chapter 7, pp. 123-140.

<sup>17</sup> Christin Hess: Post-Perestroika Ethnic Migration from the Former Soviet Union: Challenges Twenty Years On. *German Politics* 25, 3 (2016), pp. 381-397, p. 394.

## **Memory, identity and 'the homeland': diasporic consciousness versus homeland consciousness among ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union during the Cold War**

Throughout the Cold War, with the Soviet Union being hermetically sealed off, ethnic Germans – after paying a heavy price for their perceived or real association or even collaboration with the German 'homeland' under Hitler – continued to share the collective memory of a 'welcoming homeland', a myth that by and large went unchallenged since not many ethnic Germans could put it to the test. Knowledge about contemporary Germany was not very comprehensive among these ethnic German communities, further enhancing the myth.

Safran has suggested that members of diasporic communities do not feel accepted by their host society which leaves them feeling alienated and isolated. To suggest that this applies to the case of the ethnic Germans would be grossly understating their situation in the Soviet Union for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when persecution, deportation, special settlements and forced labour ensured a life of destitution and suffering. The suffering at the hands of the 'hostland' coupled with a lack of contact with the 'homeland' provided a potent combination which fuelled perceptions of the ancestral homeland as their 'true, ideal home' to which members of the ethnic German communities would 'return' and where they would be welcomed when the time was right and conditions allowed it.

The memory of suffering became the single most important aspect of the diasporic consciousness of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Victimhood turned into a crucial part of their identity, in fact it was the key factor that contributed to the emergence of a collective German identity in the first place. In contrast to what the now commonly used term 'Russian Germans' may suggest, the group has historically been far from homogenous and consisted of a number of very diverse groups from many different areas in Western Europe.

As Stefan Manz has shown, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German societal and state actors increasingly constructed German migrants as important outposts of 'Germanness'. They saw the relationship with these communities as beneficial in economic, political and cultural terms, with German Unification in 1871 providing further impetus for this development since the monarchy and the nation-



state 'now provided symbolic focal points for national identification not just within Germany, but on a global scale'.<sup>18</sup> The development of a collective German identity was further reinforced in the context of the two world wars and the subsequent victimisation that members of the different groups experienced, whether they had actually collaborated with the regime in the 'motherland' or not. The situation of ethnic German minorities in the Soviet Union had thus changed from a position of privilege in previous centuries to one of oppression and persecution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Mukhina, it was in fact the collective experience of the deportations under the Soviet regime that caused the formation of a collective German identity in the first place. In her view, 'prior to the deportations, ethnic Germans never comprised a coherent group with a common national consciousness'; in fact 'various Germanic groups often avoided contact with each other [...] because of their different religious affiliations and social class'.<sup>19</sup>

The memory of suffering formed the single most important memory strand and basis of the diasporic consciousness of Germans in the Former Soviet Union, with its members seeing themselves as part of a 'community of fate' (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*).

At the same time as ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union were nurturing notions of a 'welcoming homeland', Germans in the Federal Republic knew remarkably little about ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. Occasional eyewitness accounts of *Wehrmacht* soldiers reported encounters with 'German villages' during the invasion of the Soviet Union<sup>20</sup> but society at large gave little thought to these people's history, connection to Germany and their general status between 'hostland' and 'homeland'. The only real visibility of Russian Germans in the Federal Republic during the Cold War was provided through the Association of Germans from Russia (*Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland*), which also became a member of the Federation of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen*). Due to the largely revisionist agenda of both organisations during the Cold War, knowledge about the history and identity of ethnic German communities in the Soviet Union never really reached the mainstream of (West) German society. The new climate created by Brandt's

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<sup>18</sup> Manz: Constructing a German Diaspora, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Mukhina: The Germans of the Soviet Union, p. 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> Anecdotal evidence provided by my father Albert Wittlinger (1916-2009) who was a soldier on the eastern front.

*Ostpolitik* from the late 1960s onwards was also not compatible with the sense of victimhood that was the key aspect of ethnic German identity on the other side of the Iron Curtain and at the heart of the associations that represented them in the Federal Republic. Post-war (West) German governments – rather than relating to the Germans as ‘co-ethnics’ and making their history a part of Germany’s – reduced the relationship with these Germans to their ‘responsibility for the long-term consequences of the Second World War’ and the offer of German citizenship if they did manage to leave the Soviet Union.

### **Diaspora-homeland relations in the post-Cold War era**

As discussed in the last section, before the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations between (West) Germany and German minorities in the Soviet Union were largely determined by the legacy of the Second World War and the constraints of the Cold War. Until the expellee law reforms in the 1990s, it was relatively easy for Germans from the Soviet Union – provided that they obtained permission to leave – to gain German citizenship. (West) Germany’s readiness to accept Russian Germans declined as the number of migrants to Germany increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The mass migrations during these years – overall approximately 2.3 million ethnic Germans from the (Former) Soviet Union moved to (West) Germany between 1987 and 2015<sup>21</sup> – were caused by a liberalisation of the emigration regulations under Gorbachev and then the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It was the Law on the Settlement of the Consequences of the Second World War (*Kriegsfolgenbereinigungsgesetz*) which came into effect in 1993 that had the most far-reaching consequences for members of ethnic German communities from the Former Soviet Union and their chance to migrate to Germany. It not only made it significantly harder for these ethnic Germans to gain German citizenship but also meant a deterioration of the conditions for those who were allowed to settle in Germany, for example, in terms of financial support and the choice of a place of residence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hess: Post-Perestroika Ethnic Migration from the Former Soviet Union, p. 381.

<sup>22</sup> Eisfeld: Die Russlanddeutschen, p. 189.

Large parts of the diaspora who 'returned' to their 'homeland' had to realise that it was not as welcoming as their idea of a 'mythical homeland' and the relative ease with which they had gained citizenship had suggested. As Hess puts it, '[s]uch a non-welcoming attitude equally clashed with migrants' expectations, or the lack thereof, in two principal ways. Part of the inevitability of their disillusionment owes first to the vagueness of their pre-migration ideas of the ancestral home and associated wishful thinking.'<sup>23</sup>

In an article in 2005, Safran pointed out that 'diaspora has become a generic concept denoting a variety of things: immigrants and their descendants, ethnic minorities, and any communities trying to keep their collective identities. It also implies a consciousness of being different from surrounding society, and 'an awareness of multilocality'.<sup>24</sup> In her recent assessment of the migration of ethnic Germans from the (Former) Soviet Union, Hess has pointed out that 'ethnic German immigrants and their families, particularly from the FSU, continued throughout the past decade to integrate with difficulties and at least among the first generation relatively robust parallel communities appear here to stay.'<sup>25</sup> In terms of their integration, she concludes:

The analysis focused on two main areas of integration, which are still complex and incomplete. These are cultural integration (and I specifically do not refer to cultural assimilation) and labour market integration: both essential dimensions of integration. If many ethnic Germans still work in underpaid jobs or not at all and are rarely able to use their skills 13–18 years after they came to Germany, their participation in society remains necessarily fragmented and opportunities to use their human capital have been missed. It is an understandable consequence that parallel communities, at least among first generation migrants, have been facilitated by this. The sustenance of different identities, identifications and cultural practices among first generation migrants, results of a different socialisation and the rupture which mobility in the middle of one's life entails, are perhaps less surprising, but still significant in themselves. At the same time, for the first generation, this does not seem to create significant social tensions. In comparison, residential segregation has weakened – although not disappeared.<sup>26</sup>

This strongly suggests that what Brubaker called 'boundary maintenance' continues to be at work, even though the ethnic Germans have allegedly returned 'home'. Dual

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<sup>23</sup> Hess: *Post-Perestroika Ethnic Migration from the Former Soviet Union*, p. 387.

<sup>24</sup> William Safran: *The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective*. In: *Israel Studies* 10, 1 (2005), pp. 36-60, here: p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Hess: *Post-Perestroika Ethnic Migration from the Former Soviet Union*, p. 382.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 393-394.

or hyphenated identities therefore more aptly describe the reality of their experience after 'returning' from the diaspora. In line with this, one of my interviewees suggested that the hybrid identities of Russian Germans have meant that they have neither been an integral part of (post-) Soviet nor of German society. She also pointed out the ignorance of Germans regarding the history of ethnic Germans who migrated to Russia who 'are simply not aware that this is really part of German history'. She expressed doubt as to whether German society will ever comprehend this. A similar sentiment was also expressed in an interview with a policy-maker who commented wryly that in his policy area they were not 'spoilt' by attention from German society at large.

The extensive and deeply felt dissatisfaction of many Russian Germans became very obvious during the 'refugee crisis' in the spring of 2016, when some ten thousand of them took to the streets and demonstrated against the influx of refugees and in support of German values, motivated by rumours about the alleged rape of a girl from a Russian German family.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, many of the speeches were delivered in Russian. They thus seemed to greet the refugees who arrived in Germany from summer 2015 onwards with the same feelings of animosity and envy that they themselves had been met with by German society when they arrived in Germany in large numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their discontent also seems to have made them a soft target for the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in the state elections in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in September 2016, in which substantial numbers of Russian Germans are said to have voted for the party.<sup>28</sup> The numerous highly divisive comments received by an article in *Die Zeit* which described this phenomenon, illustrate just how much deeply

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<sup>27</sup> The demonstrations were widely covered in the German press, for example Hannah Beitzer: *Angebliche Vergewaltigung: Warum Russlanddeutsche gegen Flüchtlinge demonstrieren*. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 January 2016, available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/angebliche-vergewaltigung-die-russlanddeutschen-nehmen-an-einem-breit-gefuehrten-angstdiskurs-teil-1.2836571>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017; *Russlanddeutsche demonstrieren gegen 'Ausländergewalt'*. *Die Welt*, 25 January 2016, available at <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article151420833/Russlanddeutsche-demonstrieren-gegen-Auslaendergewalt.html>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017; Rüdiger Soldt: *Flüchtlingskrise: Die Wut der Russlanddeutschen*. *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 11 February 2016, available at <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/fluechtlingskrise-die-wut-der-russlanddeutschen-14061209.html>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Raphael Thelen and Hannes Jung: *Rostock: Die Russlanddeutschen von Groß Klein*. *Die Zeit*, 19 August 2016, available at <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2016-08/rostock-russen-deutsche-afd-sowjetunion-einwanderung>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

ingrained animosity can still be found between Germans and Russian Germans which dominate perceptions of each other.<sup>29</sup>

German society was ill prepared for the arrival of the Russian Germans about whom they did not know much, and whose strong ethnic identification seemed alien to the Germans who had undergone a postnational transformation in the aftermath of the 'Third Reich' and who – even after unification – were still reluctant to identify positively with the German nation. Different perceptions of the nation and national identity or 'Germanness' became very apparent. The ethnic Germans' idea of the nation, characterised by the intensity with which members of these ethnic communities often experience and express their Germanness, is in stark contrast to that of their co-ethnics. Russian Germans seem to fully embrace the primordialist view of their ethnic community and – since many do not even speak German anymore – do not even consider the lack of relevant language skills as an obstacle to 'being German'. Whereas ethnic Germans in the diaspora had subscribed to 'long-distance nationalism'<sup>30</sup> and had had no problem identifying with the German nation, Germans in Germany in the 1990s were less relaxed and still fairly suspicious of 'the national'. As one interviewee put it: 'Since I have arrived in Germany, I know that it is difficult to describe what is German. For the Germans from the Russian Federation, however, it is more or less clear ... it is based on descent.' She also pointed out the irony of the combination of Germany's postnationalism and its citizenship law regarding ethnic Germans from the post-Soviet space: 'Germans themselves would rather have nothing to do with it [the national]. But when late resettlers arrive in Germany, they have to prove that they belong to something that the Germans themselves don't even want to belong to.'

The difficult relationship is underpinned by different collective memories which serve to divide rather than unite. Whereas in the 1990s, Germans at last occupied themselves with the involvement of 'ordinary' Germans in the Holocaust, i.e. perpetration, the collective memory of Germans from the (Former) Soviet Union was very much dominated by narratives of victimhood.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Comments available at <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2016-08/rostock-russen-deutsche-afd-sowjetunion-einwanderung>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Safran: *The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> See also the contribution by James Casteel to this volume.

Increased exposure to Germany and the Germans, paired with enhanced information and communication flows in the post-Cold War era have contributed to a more sober view of the 'mythical homeland', also among Russian Germans who have remained in the diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

Return migration, or what can also be described as 'double return migration' or 'remigration', of Russian Germans back to the Former Soviet Union, albeit not in all cases, is indicative of the difficulties many Russian Germans have encountered on arrival in Germany.<sup>33</sup> Although the reasons for return migration are varied and there are not many reliable data available on this topic, there is no doubt that reports from returned migrants have given the idea of a 'mythical homeland' a reality check, especially in those cases where economic factors and the hope for a better life had been the key 'push' factors for migration to Germany. As one interviewee pointed out, however, increased migration is a general phenomenon accompanying the globalisation of the post-Cold War era, and it is not only Russian Germans who are leaving Germany but many other Germans as well.

The data gathered in interviews with Germans in Russia suggest an emerging complex web of identificatory practices which are influenced by their spatial and temporal context and which often, but not necessarily always, still build on the memory of suffering. They also suggest that the importance of the 'mythical homeland' as one of the key 'pull' factors has decreased. When asked what Germany meant to her, one ethnic German interviewee for example described it as a 'foreign country' and the homeland of her ancestors rather than her own. Other interviewees also emphasised the differences between Germany and Russia, in terms of their politics as well as the 'mentality' of Germans in the two countries and their very different social practices, for instance regarding the role of the family. The interviewees conveyed a fairly clear sense of the complexity of 'Germanness' and the difference between Russian Germans and Germans. The importance of

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<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of the different discourses that emerge from the experience of visits to the Federal Republic of Germany and the differing identity outcomes which result from this, see Sophie Mamattah: *Locating Ethnic Identity: Russian German Identity Construction in Ul'yanovsk*. *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, 10 (2012), pp. 1911-1937.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of this still under-researched topic, see the contributions of Markus Kaiser and Michael Schönhuth (eds.): *Zuhause? Fremd? Migrations- und Beheimatungsstrategien zwischen Deutschland und Eurasien*. Bielefeld 2015; Anna Flack: *Hühnerrudelsuppe, Pel'meni und Pommes frites: Ernährung, Identitäten und Lebensstile von remigrierten SpätaussiedlerInnen*. In: *Jahrbuch des Bundesinstituts für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa* 24 (2016), pp. 279-308.

acknowledging the Russian heritage of Russian Germans was also frequently emphasised. Rather one-dimensional perceptions of identity emerged as well, however. According to one interviewee who still lives in the diaspora in the post-Soviet space, her teenage son reacted with surprise to being called a 'Russian German' on a trip to Western Europe. He unequivocally considered himself as a German rather than Russian German.

Even though it was the post-war generation that actually experienced the suffering, the memory of victimhood continues to be a crucial part in many family histories, even for the generation that at the time of the interviews was in their late teens and early twenties. Significantly, the interview data show that the original identification of ethnic Germans as Black Sea Germans, Volga Germans etc. does not have much relevance anymore among Germans in the former Soviet space. This suggests that the shared German identity which emerged as a response to the collective and brutal punishment of Germans by the Soviet leadership from the 1940s onwards has survived in the post-Cold War era.

The mass migrations since 1987 have had a dramatic effect on the diaspora in the Former Soviet Union. The latest figures available (from 2013) on the website of the Federal Commissioner for Matters Related to Ethnic German Resettlers and National Minorities (*Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für Aussiedlerfragen und nationale Minderheiten*) suggest that there are now only around 750,000 ethnic Germans remaining in Former Soviet Union, including the Baltic states, with Russia and Kazakhstan providing the largest communities of 500,000, and over 180,000, respectively.<sup>34</sup>

So has the Federal Republic succeeded in building a new relationship between the diaspora and its homeland which reflect post-Cold War realities?

According to the coalition agreements of 2005, 2009 and 2013, German governments continue to acknowledge their 'special responsibility' towards Germans who suffered the long-term consequences of the Second World War in the successor states of the Soviet Union, whether they want to remain or wish to migrate to

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<sup>34</sup> Size of the German minorities in the CIS/ Central and Eastern European countries (according to the Federal Commissioner for Aussiedler): [http://www.aussiedlerbeauftragter.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/AUSB/DE/deutsche-minderheit-gus-baltikum.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](http://www.aussiedlerbeauftragter.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/AUSB/DE/deutsche-minderheit-gus-baltikum.pdf?__blob=publicationFile). Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

Germany. The agreement from 2005 also recognises the culture of these Germans as part of the heritage of the whole German nation.<sup>35</sup> The coalition agreement of 2009 also emphasises the contribution German minorities can make to the realm of civil society and to building bridges with some of the successor states of the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> In 2013, the Grand Coalition agreed to introduce a Day of Remembrance for the Refugees and Expellees (*Gedenktag für die Opfer von Flucht und Vertreibung*), which provided another opportunity to formally acknowledge the suffering to which German minorities in Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union had been exposed.<sup>37</sup> This does suggest that the relationship continues to be mired in the Second World War and the responsibilities arising from this for contemporary German governments.

There are, however, also more forward-looking elements to the relationship. As indicated in the coalition agreement of 2009, there are more and more attempts to utilise ethnic Germans in a bridging role, particularly regarding economic ties. As Robin Cohen has pointed out, diasporas also have the potential to act as ‘agents of development’.<sup>38</sup> An extensive network of government commissions (*Regierungskommissionen*) with a number of successor states of the Soviet Union which has been established since the end of the Cold War also continues to keep the dialogue open between ‘homeland’ and ‘hostland’. Furthermore, the Progress Report (*Tätigkeitsbericht*) of the Federal Commissioner of 2015, Hartmut Koschyk, suggests a dynamic relationship between the German government and members of ethnic German communities in the Former Soviet Union as well as in Germany and their representatives.<sup>39</sup>

Probably most importantly, however, there has been an increase in efforts to make the history of ethnic Germans who originally migrated to Russia available to a wider

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<sup>35</sup> Coalition Agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD, 2005: <http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Koalitionsvertraege/Koalitionsvertrag2005.pdf>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Coalition Agreement between the CDU, CSU and FDP, 2009: <http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Koalitionsvertraege/Koalitionsvertrag2009.pdf>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Coalition Agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD, 2013: <http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Koalitionsvertraege/Koalitionsvertrag2013.pdf>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen: Global Diasporas (footnote 5), p. 168.

<sup>39</sup> The Progress Report is available for download at <https://www.aussiedlerbeauftragter.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/AUSB/DE/taetigkeitsbericht-koschyk-2015.html>. Last accessed: 27 May 2017.



audience, for example through the travelling exhibition 'A People on the Move' (*Ein Volk auf dem Weg*) and the Museum for German-Russian Cultural History (*Museum für russlanddeutsche Kulturgeschichte*) in Detmold. At the same time, there continues to be a network of organisations, meeting places and media which caters for Russian Germans who have opted to stay in the successor states of the Soviet Union, such as the *Internationaler Verband der deutschen Kultur*, the *Jugendring der Russlanddeutschen*, the *Deutsche Moskauer Zeitung*, German-Russian Houses in Moscow and a number of other Russian cities as well as a network of meeting places in several other successor states of the Soviet Union.

### **Between hostlands and homelands**

The analysis of this chapter has demonstrated that ethnic Germans who originally migrated to the Russian Empire and their descendants in the Soviet Union and its successor states, arguably even those who returned 'home', do indeed constitute a diaspora. An examination of the German case, utilising the concepts and categories developed by diaspora theory, suggests a complex diaspora which is characterised by diverse and multidirectional migrations. In contrast to other diasporas which were generated as a result of post-Cold War globalisation, the German diaspora can look back on a centuries-long history.

So, why is there such a reluctance to actually use the term in this case? There are a number of reasons which might account for it. Firstly, it might be due to understandable sensitivities regarding the question of whether a term that has originally been used for the Jewish diaspora and is associated with the persecution of Jews can reasonably be employed to describe German ethnic minorities abroad, partly in general terms because of Germany's orchestration of the Holocaust but partly also in specific terms in view of the involvement, real or perceived, of ethnic Germans in Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, it might be due to the inherent emphasis of the term on the ethno-cultural which recalls the concept 'Volksdeutsche' which was used during the so-called Third Reich. This does not sit easily with a society and its political elites still – at least by comparison

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the mobilization of local ethnic Germans, see, for example, Eric C. Steinhart: *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*. New York 2015.

with other European countries – by and large characterised by a ‘postnational’ disposition.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the more general criticism of concepts such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘identity’ for ‘homogenizing groups of people’<sup>42</sup> might also account for the reluctance.

Nevertheless, recognising a German diaspora would open up new avenues for research which show the constructedness of Germanness in different contexts and at different times and would therefore allow us to investigate nationalism, whether it is of the long- or short distance kind. As Maurice Halbwachs pointed out, collective memory is determined by the needs of the present.<sup>43</sup> It would for example be of great interest to compare and contrast the various collective memory strands of members of the German diaspora in the post-Soviet space, in Southern Africa and in South America, and to examine the role these collective memories have played in the ethnic identity construction of these different groups.<sup>44</sup>

The analysis has also pointed out the contradiction at the heart of Germany’s relationship with its diaspora. On the one hand Germany gives members of the diaspora in the post-Soviet space the opportunity to migrate to Germany and obtain citizenship, which obviously raises expectations of being considered as co-ethnics. Yet on the other hand neither the government nor society at large consider ethnic Germans as equals. In fact, German society is generally quite ignorant of the centuries-long history of ethnic Germans in Russia and the (Former) Soviet Union. Rather than having arrived in the ‘homeland’, Russian Germans seem to have gained entry to a hybrid space which can be more aptly described as a ‘homeland diaspora’. There is no indication of the ‘creative and enriching tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity’ that Cohen envisaged. German governments for the most part hide behind the formula of ‘taking responsibility for the long-term consequences of the Second World War’, and German society continues to perceive these ethnic Germans as Russians. The integration of first generation Russian Germans in Germany has not always been successful and the interview data suggest that the picture remains mixed for subsequent generations.

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<sup>41</sup> Ruth Wittlinger: *German National Identity in the Twenty-First Century: A Different Republic After All?* Basingstoke 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Schulze: ‘*Auslandsdeutschum*’ in Brazil, p. 405.

<sup>43</sup> Maurice Halbwachs: *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago 1992.

<sup>44</sup> For the interplay of collective memory, historical narratives and ethnic identity among Russian German Mennonites in Paraguay, see John Eicher’s contribution to this volume.

The existence of complex hybrid identities among Russian Germans in Germany as well as in the post-Soviet space, which are not static but evolve over space and time, also points to a weakness within diaspora theory since it cannot easily accommodate them. An examination of 'the diaspora' suggests a much more homogenous group than the identificatory practices of Russian Germans in Germany and the former Soviet space indicate. Nevertheless, using the term 'diaspora' to talk about ethnic Germans in the Former Soviet Union 'normalises' the relationship at least to a degree and, more importantly, formally acknowledges their contribution to German transnational history – made in Russia, the (Former) Soviet Union as well as Germany.

A number of factors make it difficult to assess the future prospects of the German diaspora in the successor states of the Soviet Union. The mass exodus in the late 1980s and early 1990s in particular has made it difficult to envisage a long term future for the German diaspora in the Former Soviet Union. Where ethnic Germans are still represented in considerable numbers, their fragmentation and differing interests impede their prospects for survival as a minority. Nevertheless, there are structures in place which suggest that their continued existence is likely.

The German diaspora in its various temporal and spatial contexts provides a fascinating case study of the social construction of ethnic identity. It also offers a rich and multi-faceted research agenda for diaspora and transnational studies. It is crucial, however, that it becomes more embedded in Germany's historical consciousness.

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